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Post-socialist smallholders: silence, resistance and alternatives

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ABSTRACT

The majority of the world's smallholders live in countries that experience(d) socialism, but they largely remain invisible in agrarian studies. This special issue puts the spotlight on post-socialist smallholders, asking whether, and how, they (1) fulfil important functions in society; (2) engage in resistance (against the state or corporate actors); and (3) constitute an alternative to the industrial agri-food system. We find that post-socialist smallholders rarely confront the mainstream agri-food system head-on, but that they make a larger contribution to sustainability, community and food sovereignty than do smallholders or alternative agriculture in the “West”.

RÉSUMÉ

La majorité des petits exploitants du monde vivent dans des pays socialistes ou qui en ont fait l'expérience. Ils restent cependant largement invisibles dans les études agraires. Ce numéro spécial met en lumière les petits exploitants post-socialistes et soulève les questions suivantes : (1) remplissent-ils des fonctions importantes dans la société, et si oui, comment? (2) Sont-ils engagés dans des dynamiques de résistance (envers l'État ou les entreprises)? (3) Constituent-ils une alternative au système agroalimentaire industriel? Nous constatons que les petits exploitants post-socialistes adoptent rarement une attitude de confrontation directe envers le système agroalimentaire dominant, mais qu'ils contribuent d'avantage à la durabilité, à la communauté et à la souveraineté alimentaire que les petits exploitants ou que l'agriculture alternative « Occidentale ».

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Introduction

“The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us off forever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry”. This dark scenario painted by Eric Hobsbawm (1994, 289) has not materialised, with the peasantry showing a remarkable “resilience to obituaries”, as Frank Uekötter (2014, 175) puts it. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991

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meant the dissolution of most of the socialist regimes on Earth. The subsequent period of market-led agrarian reform, characterised by increasing corporate control of the agri-food system, the privatisation of natural resources and later the rise of land grabbing, drastic reduction of state involvement in agriculture and various forms of neoliberal governance had a deep impact on smallholders in the former (or still nominally) socialist countries. The “agrarian question” regained relevance during the turmoil of the post-socialist changes, although studies addressing this question explicitly were rare (exceptions are Hann et al. 2003; Dorondel and Șerban 2014). Most studies were exclusively framed in terms of transition from socialism to capitalism (and for Central and Eastern European [CEE] countries a transition from the Soviet bloc to the European Union), hampering a connection with debates within wider agrarian studies and development studies.¹

Whereas the classic agrarian studies built most of their theories based on the analysis of smallholders in countries on the eve or early days of socialism, such as the Soviet Union (Chayanov 1986; Lenin 2000 [1899]; Shanin 1972) or Southeast Asia (Popkin 1979; others) the post-socialist smallholder has remained rather invisible within wider agrarian studies.² Insights and concepts based on contemporary studies of the post-socialist smallholder have hardly travelled to other parts of the world. At the same time, the countries that experience(d) socialism in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet area, Asia (such as Vietnam, China, North Korea, Laos and Cambodia), as well as in Africa (Ethiopia, Tanzania and many others) and Latin America (Nicaragua and Cuba) together represent a large part of the world’s smallholders and countryside. Further, although most of the European and Asian post-socialist countries are industrialised, the smallholder sector here is much more important in economic, socio-cultural and ecological terms, than in the West. Although the “new smallholder sector” in the West has received some visibility through initiatives like farmers’ markets, urban gardening, community supported agriculture (CSA) and food justice, the smallholder sector in post-socialist settings in fact plays a much larger role in the agricultural sector and food practices of the population of the respective countries, compared to which alternative agriculture in the West pales into insignificance. Smallholders in countries such as Russia and Ukraine account for roughly half of total agricultural production value, while cultivating less than 15 per cent of total farmland (see Visser, Kurakin, and Nikulin 2019, this issue). In China, smallholders form the backbone of the agricultural sector. In some CEE countries, such as the Czech Republic, where smallholders’ share in agricultural production is substantially smaller, a large share of the population produces its own food (see Jehlička, Daněk and Vávra [2019], this issue, for how extensive informal food provisioning can enhance social resilience).³

Common characteristics of post-socialist smallholders

On the following pages, we question agrarian studies’ “silence” about the post-socialist smallholder. Therefore, we bring to the fore some of the characteristics and processes that define this “figure”. This thematic issue makes novel and critical contributions to the debates in agrarian and development studies on global concepts by raising questions about the importance, resistance and alternativeness of smallholders.

Following the demise of the socialist system the importance of smallholders markedly rose throughout CEE and the former Soviet Union. This took various forms. In some countries, with large rural populations and land reforms which entailed physical

distribution or restitution of land, such as in Albania and large part of Romania, a splitting up of large-scale state or collective farms and subsequent land fragmentation turned farm workers widely into smallholders (Stahl 2010; Dorondel 2016; Sikor et al. 2017). In the large countries of the former Soviet Union (Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus) large-scale farms were nominally privatised (by dividing paper shares, while keeping the farms largely intact). In these countries rural dwellers, while often remaining farm workers, intensified production on the small household plots that were widespread in the socialist-time countryside (Visser 2003, 2009; Wegren and O'Brien 2018).

Despite the socialist regime's focus on turning peasants into a proletariat, and temporary pushbacks against smallholdings, throughout most of socialist Eurasia smallholdings continued to be tolerated in the shadows of the collective and state farms. Smallholders simply remained indispensable for the functioning of the food system, for instance as a low-wage supplement at the collective farms and a way of mitigating the shortfalls in collective food production. Generally, rural dwellers were allowed to keep a tenth to a quarter hectare of land and a limited number of livestock (Shmelev 1979). Hence, the proletarianisation of the rural population was not fully completed during socialism and many rural dwellers kept some peasant characteristics.

Peri-urban smallholders were crucial for the rising importance of smallholders following the demise of socialism. Throughout the former Soviet Union and CEE, the majority of urbanites cultivated part of their own food on peri-urban allotments to cope with irregular fresh food supplies in the retail sector. A Western journalist living in Moscow in the late Soviet period characterised urbanites in this metropolis as peasants living in flats (Münninghoff 1991). In response to the hardship of the economic upheaval of the 1990s urbanites intensified the production on their allotments in a way similar to the intensification of production by rural dwellers.

The term "post-socialism" – an overarching category that includes a multitude of local economic and political aspects and spans a large historical and contemporary diversity – requires clarification. We posit that there are at least four common developments and characteristics which apply to this vast geographical area, covering parts of Europe, Asia and Africa, and which are closely related to the academic discussion on smallholders. The first one is the reduced influence of the state on agriculture, and on the economy at large, through deregulation. As in many other parts of the globe, neoliberal governance induced the retreat of the state from the agricultural sector – although the state initially took a strong lead on the market-oriented agricultural reform. Production quotas and guaranteed prices for agriculture were rapidly abolished, although quotas lingered informally in sub-sectors of agriculture in some places (see Hofman [2017] on Tajikistan's cotton sector; Ivanou [2019] on Belarus). Subsidies to agriculture also plummeted in the 1990s. Although not reaching the high level of socialist-era state support, subsidies to agriculture rebounded in many countries in the 2000s either through EU funding in the CEE countries following accession, or through country-level support (such as state support based on oil money in Russia and Kazakhstan).⁴

A second commonality is the major market-oriented land reforms in all the (post)socialist countries in the past two or three decades (Enriquez 2010; Wegren and O'Brien 2018). A remarkable "outcome" of the state retreat and of the market-led land reform is that the dual structure that characterised the socialist agrarian system (large collective or state farms versus tiny smallholdings, and no medium-sized farms), has by and large

continued in many countries (Spoor 2012). While private, independent farmers emerged, some of whom becoming mid-sized commercial farmers (or middle peasants), in many countries – and especially in the large former Soviet countries – this stratum remained insignificant in terms of land share, production and number of farms (see for example Visser, Mamonova, and Spoor 2012).⁵ In many cases, the dual structure has become more extreme, with smallholdings existing side by side with super-large farms consolidated and operated by domestic and foreign outside investors (Kuns, Visser, and Wästfelt 2016; Spoor 2012; Visser, Mamonova, and Spoor 2012). This stark dual structure of agriculture does not necessarily mean that the two extremes are unconnected. The strong symbiosis that existed (and often continues to exist) between them is a feature that many post-socialist countries share (see below).

A third common characteristic of post-socialism is that with the demise of their socialist regimes (or with the ascendance of a more market-oriented approach within a continued socialist regime, as in the case of China and Cuba) those countries have become increasingly affected by the globalisation of the agri-food sector. The destructive shock-therapy style, market-led agrarian reforms and more generally the hegemonic policy of the neoliberal/post-socialist state abetted a whole range of factors that disfavoured local food production. Chaotic de-collectivisation and the plummeting of state subsidies to agriculture contributed to land abandonment (Visser, Mamonova, and Spoor 2012), deterioration of irrigation systems (Dorondel 2016), decreased yields and a dramatic shrinkage of the agri-food production in the first post-socialist decade (Spoor 2009; Szelényi 1998). At the same time, increased imports from Western Europe, and the East-ward expansion of Western food processing and supermarket chains, dramatically changed the agri-food chain. The current situation of monocrop export production (for example, rapeseed, grain and sunflower in Ukraine, Russia and Romania) combined with large imports of other food products, contrasts sharply with the socialist era. The socialist drive to the national or Soviet-bloc level food security and autarky meant that almost all products were produced within the region, although sometimes at high financial cost (such as the livestock production in northern Russia) or environmental costs (such as the cotton production around the Aral Sea in Central Asia).⁶

Fourth, as discussed above, smallholders play a crucial role in all of those countries, by producing a substantial share of agricultural output and, as this issue's articles demonstrate, contributing strongly to food security, and particularly food sovereignty, in those countries (Pungas 2019; Visser et al. 2015).

Themes addressed in this issue

This issue's contributions address the importance of post-socialist smallholders in agriculture and society more broadly; the extent and forms of their resistance; and if their production is an alternative to the industrial agri-food system. Beginning with the first topic: smallholders persisted during socialism despite high rates of urbanisation and industrialisation and despite their uneasy status within an official ideology focused on collective agriculture. The economic upheaval in most post-socialist societies during the 1990s, with its cortege of neoliberal "adjustments", pushed people to different strategies of survival (Pine and Bridger 1998), key to which were self-provision and rural–urban agricultural relationships. Konstantinov and Simić (2001) showed in detail the importance of small

agricultural lands for urbanites and villagers who entered an economic exchange to preserve household food security and livelihoods. For instance, cultivating potatoes (Reis 2009) or growing pigs strengthened urban-rural family networks (Stan 2000).

This is particularly the case in Cuba, where the post-socialist transition created two separate food economies. The first, a state monopoly controlled by the political and economic elites, aimed at distribution and retail of primarily imported, high-end processed food produced by Western intensive farming. Most Cubans, however, depend for their everyday meals on smallholders' production of grains, vegetables and fruit. While this is typically high-quality and non-certified organic produce, smallholders lead a marginal and precarious existence as they lack the investment to expand their production (see Thiemann and Spoor 2019, this issue). In post-socialist countries of CEE and the former Soviet Union a similarly important supply of fruit and vegetables comes from rural smallholders as well as "non-farming" households that – despite the designation – produce significant volumes of food in their leisure time and share their produce with households that do not grow any food. For example, when both food-growing and non-growing households are considered, one-fifth of all temperate zone vegetables, fruits and potatoes (and also eggs) consumed in Czech households are provided via the informal food economy, in non-market production and distribution (Jehlička, Daněk, and Vávra 2019, this issue). In post-socialist Vietnam, with an even stronger tradition of household plot farming and petty trading than in CEE and the former Soviet Union, the costs of market reforms and liberalisation in the countryside were mitigated by household farming (Scott 2009, 197).

Another theme in this issue is the extent of resistance in post-socialist smallholders' responses to various pressures coming from the nation-state, international institutions such as World Bank or IMF and – especially in CEE – the EU. Due to the particular characteristics of post-socialist countries, responses have often diverged from early expectations of international researchers. In the early 1990s and 2000s, many authors studying agricultural reforms in CEE (for example Csaki and Lerman 1997; Swinnen 1997) promoted privatisation of agricultural land, liberalisation of the market and other reforms in the hope for a radical and rapid economic transformation of rural areas, which has not occurred. Despite large-scale reforms in the countryside, resistance has generally been limited, at least in the form of sustained social movements (Mamonova and Visser 2014; Visser et al. 2015).

At the same time, post-socialist smallholders display a wide array of other responses (including adaptive responses, Mamonova [2015]) to land grabbing, such as increased involvement in non-farm jobs (Dorondel 2016) or various forms of – sometimes subtle – negotiation with the directors of the corporate farms where they work or live (Visser, Kurakin, and Nikulin 2019, this issue). Villagers from southern Ukraine were able to intensify the agricultural production and to show significant autonomy and sustainability by using their own well to water the field or reciprocating and cooperating when using a tractor (Kuns 2017). Among villagers' adaptive strategies is production for niche markets – to avoid clashing with larger competitors (Kuns 2017; Varga 2019, this issue; Visser, Kurakin, and Nikulin 2019, this issue). A widespread response of smallholders to politico-economic infringements is outmigration (in Central Asia and the Caucasus to Russia, in CEE to Western Europe). This phenomenon, most severe in countries of South-east Europe that are now part of the EU, has dramatic consequences for rural settlements. Deserted villages with an aged population unable to farm, and widespread abandonment

of crop land – villages doomed to oblivion – is a common sight in Southeast Europe (Dorondel and Şerban 2019b; Rey and Bachvarov 1998; Stahl and Sikor 2009).

In places where land grabs have occurred, the dispossession of smallholders sometimes provoked open, organised resistance, although limited in scope, and often lacking transnational support (Visser, Kurakin, and Nikulin 2019, this issue). Following farmland privatisation in the 1990s, and local accumulation of land by more well-connected farms, the opening of land markets in the 2000s (in preparation for EU accession) combined with the rise of the global land rush (Borras et al. 2011) to create “perfect” conditions for land grabbing throughout most of post-socialist CEE, Ukraine and Russia. The indisputable financial (Kuns, Visser, and Wästfelt 2016) and political (Visser, Kurakin, and Nikulin 2019, this issue) power of domestic and international actors interested in acquiring land does not mean that smallholders are stripped of all power. Sometimes they are able to resist land deals or at least obtain a good bargain.⁷ In the post-socialist countries, the movement Ecoruralis, for instance, fights land grabs in Romania. In neighbouring Ukraine, the movement EcoAction works with peasants to draw attention to the negative implications of rapidly expanding industrial livestock complexes. In Russia, for several years of its existence the Russian movement “Peasant Front” managed to get compensation for smallholders who lost land due to land grabs in several villages (Mamonova and Visser 2014).

Scott’s peasant resistance register (Scott 1985, 2013) is arguably the most recognisable actions of the peasantry to thwart the interests of powerful national and international entities. Positioning themselves under the radar of the state, not paying taxes, engaging in informal networks and wielding similar “weapons” from the same register, post-socialist small landholders avoid an open confrontation with their oppressors. Or, when convenient, as Dorondel and Şerban (2019a, this issue) show, the same villagers instead of shunning the state may engage in what O’Brien and Li (2006), based on research in contemporary “reform socialist” China, has called “rightful peasant resistance”. They apply the instruments of the state bureaucracy to their advantage, for example by submitting written complaints framed within the official discourse. In Russia, expressions of smallholders’ grievances similarly refer to state power, but rather than referring to state institutions and ideologies more broadly, they mostly address (or cite) President Putin. Written petitions to the president, delegations sent to the Kremlin and renaming of places after Vladimir Putin are some of the tools used by Russian smallholders, in what might be called naïve monarchism (Mamonova 2016). Regardless of the weapons smallholders choose to fight for their rights, they exercise agency in attempting to achieve their political and economic goals through the situational character of their actions (Turner and Caouette 2009). Resistance can manifest itself, as Varga (2019, this issue) shows for Ukraine and Romania, through simply ignoring the programmes of the state and of the World Bank which aim to improve the life of post-socialist smallholders through commercialisation of agriculture.

A related question is the extent to which smallholders’ responses represent an alternative to industrialised agriculture in large-scale farms. How explicit such alternatives are and what forms they take are particularly important in the settings where former socialist regimes tried to eradicate the peasants and replace them with farm workers. Some re-peasantisation took place after the demise of the socialist regimes (see Cartwright [2001]), but in countries such as Russia, Ukraine and Czechia this process had modest results. Most rural dwellers there do not identify themselves as peasants, and instead long to be

connected with the large-scale industrial farms as in the past (see Hann et al. 2003). In fact, as several authors have pointed out, during socialism most of the peasantry was transformed into worker-peasants (Hann et al. 2003). The sharp decline of the industrial sector following privatisation, the looting of assets or simply the shutdown of factories had a huge impact which still awaits scholarly assessment, but surely this made a worker-peasant livelihood and identity more difficult to sustain.

The smallholdings in the socialist era, in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, had a symbiotic relationship with the large-scale farms (Nikulin 2003; Shmelev 1979). Such symbiosis often lingers in a reduced form, sometimes rebranded as corporate social responsibility (Visser 2003; Visser, Kurakin, and Nikulin 2019, this issue). Often the relationship between the two is neither straightforward nor simple. As Hivon (1998) points out, owners of the large farms and the capitalist entrepreneurs in agriculture are compelled by local social pressure to get involved in the community to maintain good relationships with the small landholders. Other scholars emphasise the increasingly tense relationship between the two groups of actors as a sign of mistrust and frictions created by capitalist relations (Giordano and Kostova 2001, 2002; Verdery 1999, 2003). Visser, Kurakin, and Nikulin (2019, this issue) show the various degrees of symbiosis within one country, Russia, with some regions characterised by a relatively harmonious continuation of symbiosis between large farms and plot owners to the benefit of the latter, and other localities with more contentious relations.

In such contexts, where identification as a peasant is unstable, smallholders and large farms co-exist, or grand ideological visions are distrusted, the appeal or applicability of global concepts such “food sovereignty”, “organic agriculture” and “alternative food networks” cannot be taken for granted (see Si, Scott and McCordic [2019] and Si, Schumilas and Scott [2015] on alternative food networks in China, or DeMaster [2013] on food sovereignty in Poland). Often the post-socialist smallholder practices do not constitute an explicit alternative to large-scale farming. Moreover, smallholders’ practices, if positively assessed by outsiders at all, are often framed in terms of nostalgia for a national (pre)socialist past rather than an orientation toward the future or an agenda for change. Consequently, the question arises whether such post-socialist smallholder practices can be characterised as food sovereignty or alternative food networks (Visser et al. 2015).

Conclusion

The post-socialist setting adds nuance to concepts such as food security or alternate food networks, and provides a fresh, critical look at other global concepts in agrarian and development studies. For example, both the Cuban regime and a number of scholars in agrarian studies have explicitly celebrated the achievements of Cuban smallholders in terms of agro-ecology, food sovereignty and food production. However, the contribution by Thiemann and Spoor (2019, this issue) shows that, apart from the growth of sustainable smallholders’ production during the “special period” enforced by the blockade, the on-the-ground relevance of smallholder production has lagged beyond the official rhetoric.

As other contributions in this thematic issue show, in most of post-socialist Eurasia the rhetoric is precisely the reverse. Policy makers and some research reports repeatedly characterise smallholders as backward, a relic of the past (see Kwiencinski 1998), bound to disappear unless they are integrated into corporate-led commercial value chains (see

Varga, in this issue, for a critique). In reality, smallholders often thrive within informal exchange networks and markets⁸ (Jehlička, Daněk, and Vávra 2019; Varga 2019; Dorondel and Șerban 2019a, all this issue), and provide major contributions to food production (Visser, Kurakin, and Nikulin 2019; Thiemann and Spoor 2019, both this issue), sustainability (Jehlička, Daněk, and Vávra 2019, this issue) and social coherence (Jehlička, Daněk, and Vávra 2019; Varga 2019, both this issue) – which remains under the radar (Kuns 2017). Household food production and sharing in CEE societies is an example of sustainability-compliant practices⁹ that are important in terms of the number of people involved and volumes of food produced, but they are not necessarily a result of environmental awareness or of economic necessity. On the contrary, in CEE countries like Czechia and Poland these are pleasurable activities, born of a desire for personal fulfilment and achievement, or to cement social relations through food production and exchange (Jehlička and Daněk 2017). Economic motivations play a more important role in Russia (Visser, Kurakin, and Nikulin 2019, this issue), Ukraine (Kuns 2017) or the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Although the food self-provisioning practices do not (yet) add up to a “coherent political economy of an alternative global agrarianism” (Akram-Lodhi 2007, 556), they constitute resilient social spaces in the interstices of the market, they widely generate socially appropriate, largely ecologically produced food,¹⁰ and they represent a silent exercise of agency of the post-socialist population in the food domain. This special issue is an invitation to examine further such “silent” practices and mitigate the relative neglect of post-socialist smallholders in agrarian studies.

Notes

1. An early exception is Spoor (1997). For a rare study comparing post-socialist agrarian transformation across various continents, see Enriquez (2010).
2. Yet, a recent special issue aims to insert post-socialist smallholders into wider agrarian studies (Wegren and O'Brien 2018).
3. Poland was exceptional, with very limited collectivisation and the continued reliance on smallholder farming as the mainstay of agriculture in large parts of the country.
4. Belarus, Europe's country with the strongest continuity with the socialist era, is exceptional: levels of state support remain high (Ivanou 2019).
5. In the Baltic states this dual structure is less visible. There was a strong policy to phase out smallholding: smallholders were pressured to scale up to mid-sized farms or get out of business – with subsidies for those willing to give up farming (Harboe Knudsen 2012; Mincyte 2011). Moreover, the Baltics were less attractive for large-scale investors, as agro-climatic conditions are not conducive to profitable staple crop farming for global markets.
6. Tropical Cuba was an exception within the socialist bloc, with its monoculture focused on supplying the bloc with sugar cane and the resulting revenues used to buy food crops such as wheat from the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the abolishment of preferential purchase of its sugar, Cuba turned from export to more domestically oriented production, in contrast to the growing export orientation in CEE and the former Soviet Union (Thiemann and Spoor 2019, this issue).
7. Villagers in the Philippines and Indonesia, as described by Rutten et al. (2017), built social relations with local politicians and NGOs which allowed them to countervail the power of large companies, central governments and international investors.
8. For an example of more state-driven development of smallholder production, see Kurakin and Visser (2017).

9. These practices have been labelled “quiet sustainability” (Smith and Jehlička 2013).
10. See Pungas (2019, 53) based on research in Estonia.

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